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AUTHOR Galbraith, Michael W.
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ABSTRACT

Staff development concerns pertaining to older employees (65 years old or older) and implications for higher education are discussed. The demographic trends of this population and factors affecting labor force participation are considered, along with barriers for the older adult, and possible solutions. Factors affecting older employees' participation in the labor force include changes in the social security system, demographic shifts in the age distribution of the population, continued inflation, and age discrimination legislation. Stereotypes about the job performance of older workers and current retirement policies are also addressed. It is suggested that the older worker is an important resource in the nation's labor force, but they have not been given proper consideration. Staff development professionals can help change the situation by understanding the abilities and needs of the older worker and through: involvement with advocacy groups and organizations that represent the older person; counseling, referral, training, and placement of older workers; and working to develop retirement policies that encourage older worker employment. An attitudinal change among administrators toward older workers is important to eliminate barriers to career planning for the older worker. (SW)

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THE OLDER EMPLOYEE AS A CONCERN OF STAFF DEVELOPERS

by

Michael W. Galbraith, Ed.D.

Oklahoma State University

School of Occupational and Adult Education

Classroom Building 406

Stillwater, Oklahoma 74078

(405) 624-6275

CE 016924

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ABSTRACT

This article presents an overview of the older employee as he or she relates to higher education. The demographics of this population will be presented as well as factors affecting labor force participation. Implications for higher education because of these factors will be explored, as well as the barriers and constraints for the older adult. Solutions for eliminating these barriers along with recommendations for higher education are provided.

THE OLDER EMPLOYEE AS A CONCERN OF STAFF DEVELOPERS

The older adult is an important resource. With nearly 26 million Americans 65 years and older, the nation is finally recognizing their potential contribution to society. The vast reservoir of talent and expertise that older Americans have to offer to the social and economic development of our nation has been given little attention (Rother & Edwards, 1982). A shortage of skilled labor and a corresponding need to retain older workers is projected within the decade (U.S. Department of Labor, 1981). These facts have an important implication for higher education and its order of priorities.

This article presents an overview of the older employee as a concern of the staff development professional in higher education. An older adult is an individual who is 65 years old or older. The demographics of the population 65 years and older and the factors affecting labor force participants in the age group are also presented. Implications for higher education because of these factors are subsequently explored, as well as constraints and barriers for the older adult. Solutions for eliminating these barriers along with recommendations for higher education are ultimately provided.

Demographics of the Population 65 Years and Older

The population 65 years and over in America constitutes 11.3 percent of the total population. A woman reaching age 65 today can expect to live an additional 17.5 years, a man 13.4 years. By the decade 2010-2020, the number of adults 65 years and over will approach 50 million (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1981).

The Harris Survey (1975) offered some interesting clues on the work interests of Americans 65 and over. The survey showed that of 21 million

Americans 65 and older, 2.8 million were working; 4.0 million who were not working said they wanted to work; 4.5 million were working as volunteers; and another 2.1 million who were not working said they were interested in volunteer service.

People age 65 and older who continued to work full- or part-time were involved in the following occupations: 18 percent were managers, officials, or proprietors; 17 percent were service workers; 15 percent were operatives or unskilled laborers; 11 percent were skilled craftsmen or foremen; and 10 percent were professionals and clerical workers. In proportion to the total labor force participation, the older worker had low representation in skilled craftsmen or foremen, professional and clerical work occupations.

A more recent Harris Survey (1979) of current employees and retirees found 51 percent of the employees surveyed want to continue working in some capacity; 48 percent in the age group 50-64 wish to continue working after age 64; 46 percent of those already retired would prefer to be working; and 53 percent of those retired wish they had never done so.

In a recent survey, Copperman, Keast and Montgomery (1981) noted that almost two-thirds of the older workers questioned said they would consider part-time work as a step between full-time work and retirement. Almost three out of every four who expressed such an interest in part-time work plan to continue working for their current employer after reaching the earliest eligibility age for some pension benefits.

Yet, there is evidence that management may not perceive this willingness of older employees to continue work on a part-time basis. Having a labor pool of retirees available on an as-needed basis to meet temporary increases in work loads was especially appealing to 30 managers questioned in a study by McConnell (1981). The major obstacle in implementing options was managers'

perceptions that older workers and supervisors were not interested in such alternatives.

A survey of older workers by Usher (1981) disclosed a strong interest in alternative work options as a means of extending their work lives. Continuing part time in the same job was the most popular work option. Perhaps the answer to whether older employees would really respond to the alternative work options depends on whether work options are present or absent or limited for them.

Factors Affecting Older Employee Participation

Copperman, Keast and Montgomery (1981) state that, in addition to changes in the social security system, there are other forces which will compel a change in the participation rate of employees. These include demographic shifts in the age distribution of the population, continued inflation, a lengthening life span and age discrimination legislation.

Inflation is an important factor; individuals on fixed incomes are seriously affected by high inflation rates. Too many retiree assets and resources are depleted trying to survive. One alternative has been to delay retirement for economic reasons or to seek job opportunities after retirement.

Health is the second factor. Because of increased lifespan and better medical/health care, the older adult can remain in the work force longer.

The third factor that has increased the older worker's interest in remaining in the labor force is the passage of the Age Discrimination in Employment Act (ADEA) of 1967 (P.L. 95-256), an amendment to the Older Americans Act. Specifically, the ADEA ended mandatory retirement for federal workers and raised the retirement age to 70 for nonfederal employees, encouraging workers to remain on the job past the usual retirement age.

Although ADEA sought to end age discrimination by employers in hiring, firing, training, and other detrimental employment conditions, the law is incomplete and is not fully reinforced. (Meier, 1978)

A major omission of the ADEA is affirmative action. No positive action is required by law, unlike the requirements for such action for minorities and women. The responsibility for enforcing the ADEA shifted in 1978 from the U.S. Department of Labor to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. Through this shift, workers seeking to file charges of age discrimination lost access to 300 office and outreach stations. (DeGooyer, 1982) The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission has only 22 district and 27 area offices throughout the U.S. where the older worker can receive assistance. (U.S. Senate, 1981)

Thus, inflation, improved health care, and the ADEA all have implications for higher education and the retention of its older employees. Major implications for higher education institutions are whether they are prepared to provide the necessary physical and human resource development for this age group.

Barriers and Constraints

Currently, many potential barriers and constraints for the older employee in higher education exist. Included are stereotypes and myths, and current retirement policies.

Stereotypes and myths persist about the job performance of older workers. Sonnenfield (1978) conducted a survey of Harvard Business Review readers and discovered that managerial decision-making was still affected by age stereotyping. His research challenges age stereotypes in relation to job performance with the following findings:

- Age appears as an asset in sales performance as reported by insurance companies, auto dealers, and large department stores.

- Age minimally affects manual workers with great variations within age groups.
- Age does not significantly affect output, according to a major study of government and industrial office workers.
- Older decision-makers tend to take more time to make decisions but evaluate new information more accurately.
- The performance of older workers is as good as if not better than that of younger people not under time pressure. (Sonnenfield, 1978)

Retirement policies are another barrier for older employees

Presently, many retirement policies are more appealing than employment policies and programs that create an extended work life. (Rother & Edwards, 1982) Administrators may be reluctant to provide the necessary planning and programming if this current trend does not change.

The University of San Diego has initiated a phased retirement option program that has been very successful (O'Neil, 1981). The older employee enters into a contract agreement stipulating duties, salary, and effective date of entry into the program. Life and disability insurance coverage is maintained by the university. The older employee retains tenure, voting privileges as well as remaining eligible for promotions.

The phased retirement option program supports the continuing commitment to academic excellence. With phased retirement, the individual can reduce his time commitment to the university, while the university retains the expertise of the individual.

Solutions to Eliminating Barriers and Constraints

Staff development professionals can have a significant impact in eliminating barriers for older workers. However, an attitudinal change must first

occur if the majority of stereotypes and myths of the older worker are to be eliminated. Initially, they should be educated about the characteristics of aging. This would enable the personnel administrator to design training programs that fit the older worker's abilities and skills.

In addition, staff development professionals should be involved with advocacy groups and organizations that represent the older person. Groups such as the Gray Panthers, American Association of Retired Persons, National Council on Aging, Gerontological Society of America, and the National Caucus on the Black Aged are important sources of information and participation. To understand the needs, attitudes, and abilities of older workers, it is important to be personally involved. Literature from these advocacy groups will also add a new dimension to the knowledge base that administrators can use in planning and programming for older adults.

Staff development professionals can assist in the counseling, identification, location, training and placement of older workers. They can be a catalyst in the identification of personnel policies and practices that need to be changed in order to make job options and training possible for older workers.

Career planning for older workers may become more effective once the present retirement policies by many colleges are changed. Retirement policies tend to put limitations on any possible training opportunities for the older worker (Meier, 1978). Some older workers in the preretirement age group begin to devote their interest to retirement which creates a barrier to training and placement.

Staff development professionals can assist in developing retirement policies that encourage older worker employment. Working with administrators and older employees, staff development professionals may adjust current policies

by establishing items, such as phased retirement and expanded work options that include flex-time, shared jobs, and job redesign and reassignment. These adjustments would demonstrate additional need for career training and programming for older workers.

Summary

The older worker is an important resource in our nation's labor force. However, they have not been given the proper consideration they deserve. Staff development professionals can help change the situation by understanding the abilities and needs of the older worker.

An attitudinal change among administrators toward older workers must be the basic criterion. Once this is accomplished, the barriers to career planning for the older worker will become easier to dismantle and solutions more easily found. The older worker is a resource that colleges and universities should not overlook. They can add an enriching new dimension to higher education.

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